



Olive Oil Guide

Olive oil is an universe made of thousands of oils, not one, produced using different “varietals” or “cultivars”, olive varieties, from almost every corner of the world, from Spain to Italy, from Australia to USA, from Palestine to Tunisia and every olive oil has its unique characteristics given by the olive variety, mill and climate, the mains, that make it better suited for a particular food or cuisine, with the general rule of delicate oils going with delicate food and more intense oils with richer, flavoursome food.

Extra virgin olive oil, which our guide focuses on, is one of them and the most fascinating of all. Extra virgin olive oil is a world similar to wine, where each grape gives unique characteristics to the wine, each olive oil variety produce a unique extra virgin olive oil. Extra virgin olive oil is too often an underappreciated ingredient, we buy the best quality meat or fish or freshest and in season vegetable and season them with the cheapest olive oil. Before explaining how to professionally taste and assess extra virgin olive oil, lets define an extra virgin olive oil. An extra virgin olive oil is a superior olive oil obtained directly from the first pressing of the olives and only using mechanical processes, without the use of chemicals to extract the oil, and with an acidity not exceeding 0,8%.

In the olive oil pyramid, extra virgin olive oil sits at the top, followed by virgin olive oil, rarely found and also obtained from first pressing, cheaper, but with a slightly higher acidity (under 2%) determined by the lower quality of the olives. Next is olive oil, even cheaper, with an almost bland taste, mainly used as cooking oil. At the bottom of the pyramid there is the pomace oil, the cheapest of all, obtained through the use of solvents/chemicals.

Extra virgin olive oil is produced all over the world, from north to south, from east to west, but being an Italian specialist, before discussing the different stages of an olive oil tasting that is the same for all extra virgin olive oils, a few words about Italian extra virgin oils and their characteristics. Italian extra virgin olive oils are classified into **DOP** and **IGP**, with only one IGP, the IGP Tuscany, and 41 DOPs extra virgin olive oils. The DOP status not only guarantees that the extra virgin olive oil is obtained from specific olive varieties from a determined area, but also that the olives are pressed in a mill in the same area.

Due to the current EU legislation, it is possible to find “Made in Italy” extra virgin olive oils made with a blend of European or Mediterranean oils or olives. **The “made in Italy” refers to the bottling plant, the mill, not the actual provenance of the olives or oils, and these tend to be the cheap Italian extra virgin olive oils found on supermarkets’ shelves but they have, written on their back label, hidden from consumers’ eyes, the provenance of the olives or oils.** Italian extra virgin olive oils with “100% Italian” on the label are, on the other side, extra virgin olive oils made with olives grown in Italy. For a good Italian extra virgin oil we don’t want to pay less than £15 per litre, more for DOP and IGT.

Italian extra virgin oil’s characteristics and flavours vary from region to region, Leccino for example is a variety found all over Italy, and olive variety, but can be broadly classified in 3 main groups: northern, central and southern extra virgin olive oils. The northern oils are mild, delicate, very good with fish dishes. Oils from the central regions tend to be stronger, with grassy notes whilst oils from the southern regions, have a drier, more herbal flavour, very intense.

Extra virgin olive oil is a healthy food not just a cooking ingredient, rich in antioxidants, especially vitamin E, and among plant oils contains the most monounsaturated fat, the good fat, and the least polyunsaturated fat, the bad one. It also contains other healthy fats such Omega 3 and Omega 6. Extra virgin olive oil is also rich in polyphenols. According to medical research, a diet rich in polyphenols may help protect from chronic health conditions such as certain cancers, heard disease, type 2 diabetes and neurodegenerative diseases. Polyphenols are: antioxidants, anti-inflammatory, neuro-protective, good for insulin sensitivity and heart health. Polyphenols are also good for gut bacteria. Polyphenols give the oil the bitter flavour that many don’t like: **a good extra virgin olive oil must have a certain bitter taste, leaving a slight pungency in the throat.** Extra virgin olive oils that don’t have the bitter taste, so called flat, lack polyphenols and don’t possess any of the good stuff. When extra virgin olive oil was a luxury, it was taken daily, a spoon every morning, as a healthy supplement, even now, many still do it.

The other element that determines the quality of the oil is the mill. Stone mills do not produce a better olive oil, the main reason being that the olives reach a higher temperature when crushed and there is plenty of exposure to oxygen, which results in oil with less antioxidants, less healthy and a shorter shelf life. Do not believe that the “old” way of producing olive oil is better. In modern mills, the process takes place inside, so that the oil is never exposed to oxygen and all other parameters are kept under control.

A good extra virgin olive oil is made with perfect olives, not damaged, picked before they are fully ripe and milled as soon as possible, ideally within a few hours from picking. The result is an olive oil with a very low acidity, plenty of polyphenols (their content varies between olive varieties) and all the other good stuff.

Extra virgin olive oils are then classified according to their fruitiness. According to the International Olive Council (COI), the adjective fruity indicates the presence of the typical fragrance of healthy, fresh and harvested olives at the right degree of ripeness and are classified in:

Fruttato Leggero (lightly fruity)

Fruttato Medio (medium fruity)

Fruttato Intenso (intense fruity)

The fruttato, fruitiness, of an extra virgin olive oil varies according to when the olives are picked, the olives ripeness, the mill used and lastly, the cultivar, the olive oil variety that produce the olive oil, each with a variety's distinctive characteristics, exactly like grapes.

A fruttato leggero is characterized by slight bitter and spicy sensations. These are delicate oils perfect for simple dishes with a delicate flavor such as salads, raw or boiled fish and also for pastry. Examples are the extra virgin olive oils from the north of Italy.

Fruttato Medio is characterized by a good balance between bitter and spicy. These oils stand out for their nose of tomato combined with pleasant herbaceous and sometimes balsamic notes. Ideal for dishes with balanced flavors such as soups, grilled vegetables, cooked shellfish, blue fish or stewed fish and fresh cheeses. Examples are olive oil from Abruzzo, Calabria and Sicily.

Fruttato Intenso, characterized by pronounced aromas with marked bitter and spicy notes. These oils stand out for their strong vegetal notes reminiscent of artichoke and for the perfect balance between bitter and spicy. They are perfect for dishes with a bitter tendency such as salads with a strong flavor such as those with rocket or radicchio but also grilled meats. Examples are olive oils from Tuscany and Apulia.

These are the different aromas and flavours we can find in an extra virgin olive oil:

Olives

Green, right ripening, ripe

Fruity

Unripe, ripe, apples, bananas, citrus fruits, berries, exotic fruit

Dried fruit

Almond, hazelnut, walnut, pine nut

Unripe vegetables

Grass, olive leaf, artichoke, thistle, unripe tomato

Vegetable

Ripe tomato, aubergine

Aromatic spices

Rosemary, mint, oregano, floral, chilli

A couple of final tips before we learn how to taste olive oil: good extra virgin olive oil always comes in dark bottles, the light damages the oil, never in a plastic bottle and once opened, the oxidation process starts so the oil will need to be used within a reasonable time, no point of saving it for special occasions, eventually it will lose its flavour and healthy benefits.

We are now ready to learn the tasting process according to the experts, but anyone can appreciate the differences between extra virgin olive oils by simply taking three different extra virgin olive oils with different characteristics, possibly one delicate, one medium and one robust with a selection of food, a boiled potato is a perfect candidate, and taste it with each of the oils. The food will taste different, in some case the oil will be too strong, in others it will be too delicate and in others yet, their flavours will complement each other perfectly.

But if you fancy tasting like a professional, get a small glass, olive oil is tasted by drinking it, and a green apple, possibly the Granny Smith variety that due to its acidity is perfect to clean our palate between olive oils.

Visual Analysis

The visual aspect in the evaluation of an extra virgin olive oil is not important, the colour is irrelevant except for the identification of the type of olives used. The different shades of colour (from green to yellow) are mainly due to the ripeness of the olives and the cultivar, olive variety, used and extraction method.

Olfactory Analysis

Pour a small amount of oil (about 20 ml) in the glass and with one hand cover and the other warm the glass for a minute or two whilst swirling. When the oil reaches our hand temperature, stick the nose in the glass and take a deep sniff. The “nose” will tell us its qualities, fruttato, and defects.

Gustative Analysis

Take a sip, don't be shy, you need enough olive oil to be able to appreciate all its qualities. Suck air through, this allows the oxygenation of the oil and capture its aromas, making sure the oil touches all areas of your palate, then swallow some or all.

The peppery sensation, called pungency detected in the throat, is very important and is a positive characteristic, and these are the polyphenols, the chemical compounds that provide stability and have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects. The pungency goes from very mild to intense.

Finally, have fun and discover great extra virgin olive oils and learn how and when to use them. Below some of the terms used in describing extra virgin olive oils, positives and negatives.

Positives (Qualities)

Bitter: characteristic flavour of oil obtained from greens olives, which must not be overly accentuated.

Harmonic: it is said of an oil whose fragrance, taste and fluidity components are in perfect balance.

Artichoke: flavour that recalls the taste of the tenderest part of the artichoke.

Sweet: in the case of delicate oils, the flavour tend to be sweet Flowers: Delicate flavour of white or yellow flowers, gives a delicate taste to the oil.

Fruity: an aroma of oil that reminds the scent and taste of a healthy, fresh and perfectly ripe fruit. Fruity can cover a range that extends from a lightly to a very intense (more pungent) degree.

Almond: typical almond flavour, fresh or dry. It is appreciated as a retro-olfactory sensation and is typically associated with sweet oils.

Ripe: characteristic flavour of ripe olives, often found in yellow oils with a round taste, tending to sweet.

Spicy: peppery sensation characteristic of oils produced at the beginning of the harvest, mainly from not fully ripe olives. It is also a characteristic of Sicilian olive oils.

Round: an attribute suitable for oil that has a full and balanced taste. Spices or vegetables or apple: when the dominant notes evoke these flavours and fragrances.

Green grass: when the oil has a taste that reminds the smell of freshly mowed grass; a positive attribute if the oil is smooth.

Negative (Defects)

Winy or vinegary: flavour recalling that of wine or vinegar, characterised by oils that have undergone a fermentative degeneration and the resulting formation of acetic acid, ethyl acetate and ethanol.

Cooked or overcooked: the oil odour of when has been exposed to high temperatures during the making process.

Hay or woody: characteristic odour of oils extracted from dried olives. Metallic: reminding of metal due to a pervasive or prolonged contact of olives with machinery during the making process

Sludgy: a defect in oils not properly filtered that through with sludge, results in unpleasant smells.

Mouldy: flavour found in oils extracted from olives harvested from the ground and stored for long in damp environments.

Rancid: flavour found in oxidised oils, that have been exposed to air and heat, it is accentuated with ageing.

Soily: flavour of oil obtained from olives harvested from the ground and not washed properly.

Done with the theory, it is now time to put into practice what you learned. Order your Italian olive varieties [map](#) and choose a couple of [extra virgin olive oils](#) to start your journey into the fascinating world of extra virgin olive oil and extra virgin olive oil will never be the same again. We stock some of the best Italian olive oils with a wide range of organic extra virgin olive oils, all single estate and all 100% Italian, you won't find any made from EU or Mediterranean olives amongst our range.